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Author(s): M. J. Geller

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Freud, Magic and Mesopotamia: How the Magic Works

M.J. Geller

No other system of Western or Near Eastern magic, neither Greek nor Egyptian nor Jewish, is as well-preserved and as highly developed as Mesopotamian magic in terms of the quantity and variety of magical texts. Much of what we might call "ancient psychology" was expressed in incantations, which were mostly written as forms of therapy to help people in distress. Although so many of Freud's ideas on magic and psychology have been thoroughly discussed and digested, his theories have never been applied to Mesopotamia. His almost total lack of awareness of the richness of cuneiform literature is understandable, of course, but we can still lament it.

A cuneiform tablet from around 700 B.C. records the following notes of an ancient physician:

If a man had a mishap, and he does not know how it happened, or he constantly has losses and debts (such as) losses of barley and silver, or losses of slaves and slave-girls, or of oxen, sheep, dogs, and pigs, as well as acquaintances regularly dying; he constantly suffers from anxiety, he speaks but no one obeys, calls but no one answers; (instead of) achieving his desires or watching over his household, he constantly shivers in bed, or suffers from paralysis throughout his limbs, his heart is filled (with anger) towards god and king, his limbs are flaccid, and at times he is frightened and cannot sleep day or night, he constantly has disturbing dreams, he suffers from paralysis from lack of food and drink, he forgets what he is saying while speaking: that man has the anger of a god or goddess upon him (Ritter and Kinnier Wilson 1980, 24-6).

This sounds like a man who needs to see a psychoanalyst.

In modern terms we might suggest that the patient is suffering from "neurosis," or "phobia," or "depression." Freud himself gives a surprisingly similar description of the type of patient an analyst might confront:

A patient ... may be suffering from fluctuations in his moods which he cannot control, or from a sense of despondency by which his energy feels paralysed because he thinks he is incapable of doing anything properly, or from a nervous embarrassment among strangers. He may perceive, without understanding the reason for it, that he has difficulties in carrying out his professional work, or indeed any comparatively important decision or any undertaking. He may one day have suffered from a distressing attack—unknown in its origin—of feelings of anxiety ... (Freud ed. Freud 1991, 8).

But in antiquity, of course, such problems were associated squarely with demons.

Misfortunes were either caused by angry gods whom the patient had somehow managed to offend, or by malicious and malevolent demons. These were perceived as the agents which most directly affected the patient's psyche or health. It would be helpful to know what these demons were thought to look like, since pictures of ancient demons might provide some insights into the inner workings of the Mesopotamian mind. In reality, scholars are often surprised at how abstract the demons are in magical texts, and how often they are devoid of any real personality, as in the following example:

The evil Udug-demon, which is let loose in the street, seeks contact with a man, the evil Ala-demon, which is let loose in the street, envelops people. The evil ghost, which is let loose in the street, turns a man into a corpse, the evil Galla-demon, which is let loose in the street, snatches people away (Geller 1985, 31 lines 170-3).

The demons are dangerous, but what do they look like? In one description the demons are like birds:

They are let loose, they screech above, they twitter below. They are the poisonous gall of the gods. They are a great storm released from heaven. They are the owl which hoots in the city. They are spawned in heaven, they are children born of earth. On high roofs and broad roofs, they whirl like a flood (ibid., 40-1 line 362ff.).

Another demon, the Ala-demon, is described as cloud-like and amorphous, having no human form:

Whether you be the evil Ala who has no mouth,
Whether you be the evil Ala who has no limbs,
Whether you be the evil Ala who hears not,
Whether you be the evil Ala who has no countenance,
Whether you be the evil Ala who is not seen in the daytime,
Whether you may be the evil Ala who, on the couch at night, spills (semen) from a man in his sleep,
Or whether you may be the evil Ala who, as "sleep-robbet," always stands about in order to deprive a man (of sleep),
Whether you may be the evil Ala who is a god stalking at night, who does not recoil from filthy hands,
Or whether you may be the evil Ala who urinates like an ass while crouching over a man (ibid., 137 lines 8-24).

The Sumerian demon Maskim, on the other hand, whose name literally means "bailiff," is a police-like figure, whom we might describe as the demonic equivalent to a corrupt official, against whom one is virtually powerless (cf. Falkenstein 1956, 49ff.). A similar demon is the Galla-demon, equivalent to the Netherworld police who accompany Inanna from the Netherworld as she emerges to search for a substitute (cf. Sladek 1974, 65f. and 309ff.; also Geller 1985, 46–7 lines 468ff.). A third demon, the Asag, was the name of a mythological anti-hero, a formidable enemy from neighbouring mountains who was once foolhardy enough to challenge the powerful god Ninurta to battle, and lost (Jacobsen 1988, 225ff.). His name also denotes the *asakku*-disease,¹ and the word for "taboo." This does not necessarily mean that the disease was thought to be brought on by the violation of a taboo, and in fact the relationship between these different meanings of Asag/*asakku* is unclear. This demonstrates a general problem of interpreting demon names, since the appellations of "bailiff-demon" or "gendarme-demon" or "taboo-demon" simply do not provide enough information to explain the rôle these demons played in the Mesopotamian psyche. Here is where a Freudian analysis of these incantations might help us.

Ego, Id and Superego

There is no Mesopotamian terminology for Freud's "id," "ego" and "superego." Nevertheless, one omen-series from Mesopotamia, known as *Šumma ālu*, contains a section dealing with omens derived from social and sexual practices, which might help identify some general aspects of Mesopotamian personality structure. The omens are, as expected, orientated toward male rather than female sexuality, but they may provide some relevant data.

The ego is most clearly defined by Freud in relation to feelings of love and hate, which he describes as originating at first from narcissism and auto-erotic organ-pleasure. Sexual love develops out of instincts of incorporating or devouring (Freud ed. Freud 1991, 214ff.). This can be seen in the following Mesopotamian love incantation:

I hold you fast, just like Ishtar held Dumuzi,
And the beer god (Siraš) holds her drinker. I have
bound you with my hairy mouth,
In my urine(-filled) vulva,
In my saliva(-filled) mouth, in my urine(-filled) vulva.
May no strange woman go behind you.
The dog is crouching, the wild boar is crouching,
But you are crouched down at my crotch
(Wilcke 1985).

Reports of dreams and dream omens from Mesopotamia can also offer a slight glimpse into the id or collective unconscious of ancient society.² Dreams are essentially types of omens: having sex with one's mother in a dream has nothing whatever to do with any incest taboos, but is simply recorded as a sign that

portends something good or bad, without reference to any moral questions. This is similar to how Freud perceives dreams, as windows into the id, the unconscious mind which is not guided by rules and regulations but is free to express repressed desires and activities which would otherwise be shockingly improper. Mesopotamian dream reports supply a rich source for such thoughts, presumably drawn from actual dreams which were reported to the scribes and carefully recorded as part of the science of omens. Much of the symbolism which Freud finds in dreams appears in Mesopotamian dream reports as well, as one might expect.³ Nevertheless, it is impossible to analyse ancient dreams according to Freud's notions of latent or manifest parts of dreams, obviously because one cannot interview patients to find out what they were thinking about on the day they had the dream, which is a crucial element in Freud's method. Nevertheless, some elements of ancient dreams can be analysed, particularly those parts which touch upon relevant symbols and which may indicate repressed thoughts or fears, usually associations with sex or death.⁴

A selection of these dreams is as follows:

If a man has sex with the goddess Ishtar,
If he has sex with a god,
If he has sex with a king,
If he has sex with an important person,
If he has sex with a priestess,
If he has sex with a wife of the king,
If he has sex with a daughter of the king,
If he has sex with another man's wife,
If he has sex with a corpse, etc.
(Oppenheim 1956 line 290ff.).⁵

Such dreams include necrophilia and adultery, which were certainly unseemly behaviour, and even homosexuality may have been frowned upon. Other dreams concern contact with the dead, supernatural occurrences such as stars falling upon a man, drinking wine and beer, or urinating into the canal, all of which Freud would recognise as the "dark, inaccessible part of our personality; what little we know of it we have learnt from our study of dream-work and the construction of neurotic symptoms ... we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations" (Jacobs 1995, 57).

The superego also has a role to play in Mesopotamian sex omens: "if a man has a woman grasp his penis he is impure and no god will accept his prayer."⁶ The rules of good behaviour and etiquette imposed by society appear to forbid such actions, which may be pleasurable but are not allowed.

Repression

Repression was one of the basic planks of Freud's theory of personality, which he defined as "turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious" (Freud ed. Freud 1991, 524). According to Freud, thoughts or feelings which cause anxiety are pushed into the unconscious, and the person then de-

nies any awareness of the cause of the anxiety. If the repression is not completely effective, then a state of anxiety can be stimulated by the unconscious mind producing threatening feelings without the patient being aware of the reason for the anxiety. This is where the descriptions of the demons may help the incantation treat the sufferer. The process of denial can be influenced by focusing on the demon as the cause of the anxiety, particularly if it reminds the patient of those intimate feelings which were originally repressed. Repression, as explained by Freud, takes many forms, some of which can clearly be detected in Mesopotamian incantations.

One obvious example of repression occurs in the so-called *ardat lilî* incantations, which feature the maiden ghost who is frustrated by never having had normal sexual relations:

the maiden is like a woman who never had intercourse, like a woman who was never deflowered, one who never experienced sex in her husband's lap, one who never peeled off her clothes in her husband's lap, one for whom no nice-looking lad ever loosened her garment-clasp (Geller 1988, 14).

The *ardat lilî* or maiden ghost returns from the Netherworld in this incantation to haunt a human victim with whom she might have the type of normal sexual relations which she never experienced while still living. The idea of a young maiden coming at night to have sex with a man is a frequent and even pleasurable fantasy, which does not explain why this image of the succubus was to be feared. Jewish magic dreaded the image of the succubus because of nocturnal emissions or wet dreams through which demons could presumably be spawned, but this fear does not seem to be represented in Mesopotamian texts.⁷

Denial

A Freudian interpretation might suggest that the fear of copulation with a demon represents the unconscious repression of the desire for illicit sex, perhaps an incestuous relationship. Freud argued that males necessarily repress the desire to have sex with their mothers or engage in other incestuous relationships and that much of such repression is necessarily unconscious (Freud ed. Freud 1991, 360–2). Hence, the young girl in *ardat lilî* incantations is a virgin, which might well invoke the repressed desire of a man to have illicit intercourse with a daughter or young sister or indulge in an otherwise forbidden liaison. In this case, one type of repression expressed here might be “denial,” the commonest of defense mechanisms known to Freud, in which a person's thoughts or feelings which cause anxiety are repressed into the unconscious, and the person then denies any awareness of the cause of the anxiety. If the repression is not completely effective, then a state of anxiety can be stimulated by the unconscious mind producing threatening feelings, without the patient being aware of the reason for the state of anxiety (ibid., 525).

Displacement

A second type of repression represented in these particular incantations would be labelled by Freud as “displacement,” in which the demon acts as a substitute for the original repressed desires (ibid., 531). It is the incestuous desire which is projected onto the demon in the incantation, namely that she wishes to have intercourse with the patient, and he can now safely refuse. The ritual which accompanies the incantation prescribes the making of male and female figurines, dressed in wedding robes, which are to be married to each other in a mock marriage ceremony (Geller 1988, 35 and 21; Lackenbacher 1971, 126). The ritual then displaces the object of repressed desire when the statue or image of the *ardat lilî* is married to a male ghost, in order to deflect her attentions away from her human victim. Anxiety can also be caused by repressed guilt. This process, for instance, is apparent in descriptions of ghosts or types of demons which regularly visit a household:

Whether you are the “[let me eat with] him daily”-demon,
or the “[let me drink with] him daily”-demon,
or the “[let me anoint myself with] him daily”-demon,
or the “[let me get dressed with] him daily”-demon;
or the “let me anoint myself with him when I’m lousy”-demon,
or the “let me get dressed with him on his lap when I’m cold”-demon
(Geller 1985, 38–9 lines 328–33).

Here we have descriptions of everyday neurotic images, of either ghosts or demons who participate in normal daily activities with their victims, including getting dressed, bathed or anointed. This list might indicate types of ghosts who return to their old haunts or acquaintances, because they have no one to offer them the proper funerary rites and offerings; they come back to trouble those who once knew them and now neglect them (ibid., 146f.).⁸ The repressed feelings here expressed by this list might be the patient's guilt resulting from a feeling that he has neglected his obligations towards parents or forebears. He transfers those feelings by describing the ghosts as “demons.” According to Freud, repressed feelings of guilt are often associated with melancholy or depression, which may be relevant to the following passage:

They are not held back either by door or bolt,
but they slither through the door like a snake.
They carry off the wife away from the husband's lap,
they remove the son from his father's knee,
they take the bridegroom from his father-in-law's house.
[They are] the sleep and stupor which [follow]
behind a [man] (ibid., 40–1 lines 369–74).

This description of the demons as slipping into the house like snakes (which may have its own associations with phobia) features two undesirable results: first, the demons cause the interruption of normal sexu-

ality by driving the wife from her husband's lap and the groom from the wedding house;⁹ second, the demons bring sleep and stupor upon a man—presumably signs of depression, one of the most common categories of known psychological disorders. The general descriptions of the various demons as a “storm” which darkens everything or as a cloud which covers the man like a garment (cf. Geller 1985, 20–1 line 15) may well represent depression:

Internal disease and stricture, sickness, headache,
and the Ala-demon covering the patient,
(All) agitated the distraught man like a storm and
sprinkled him with gall.
That patient will progressively lose his vitality,
undulating [like a wave],
[He will neither be able to] dine [nor] drink
(ibid., 58–9 lines 650–54).

The demons are therefore responsible for the interruption of normal intimate family life or they bring on depression, resulting in a loss of desire and appetite (or Freudian “drives”) which are precisely the types of situations resulting from states of anxiety.

The role of sex in Mesopotamian incantations also includes rituals and incantations to help a man get or maintain an erection by having a woman rub his member with oils, while making salacious comments comparing the man to various priapic animals:

Wild ass, wild ass, wild bull, wild bull! Who has made
you limp like loose ropes, who has blocked your pas-
sage like a street, who has poured cold water on your
heart (i.e. penis) who has caused depression in your
mind, and sleeplessness ... (Biggs 1967, 19).

The reason for the impotence is clearly stated: “My witch and my witch, my sorceress and my sorceress, you have loosened me like drawn cords” (ibid., 21). It seems clear that performance anxiety may have caused the impotence, and in some cases the potency incantations may have been effective in dealing with the anxiety. This defense mechanism is a form of “displacement,” which in this case redirects the cause of the anxiety on to a witch.¹⁰

Projection

Another characteristic of repression is “projection,” in which internal perceptions are externalised and projected on to something else. An interesting Mesopotamian example of projection can be found in a particular group of spells known as *Egalkurra* incantations, a type of “black magic” which was intended to treat the patient who was overwhelmed by fear and hatred of his enemies at court:

You of heaven, pay attention, you of earth, listen to my
voice, until I pinch the cheeks together of my enemy at
court, and I tear out his tongue, I force his words back
into his mouth, so that his own mouth interferes with
his talking, and I won't even allow him to fart
(Ebeling 1931, 34).

These spells are intended to blunt the threat of slander or gossip behind his back before the king or at court. The incantations in part defend the innocence of the courtier, by claiming that he has done nothing treacherous or treasonous or without the king's knowledge; in part, too, they magically call for the binding of the enemy's tongue. The accompanying rituals necessitate the right make-up and clothing to be worn at court, including deodorant-like oils and lapis jewels; these are intended to impress the king and make him glad to see the client when he enters the palace.

These incantations reveal something of the psychology of the time. Rivals or enemies may only have existed in the patient's mind; in other words, such incantations are treating a mild form of paranoia (Kinnier Wilson 1965). Moreover, they were probably not composed for someone who actually faced intrigues at court. It is more likely they were used by ordinary individuals within the Mesopotamian bureaucracy who *imagined* they had rivals. One can only speculate as to how reciting such incantations was thought to solve the problem and how they were thought to work.

A Freudian approach might suggest that they were a type of defence mechanism in which a man projects repressed feelings on to others, so that hatred of colleagues is experienced as the hatred of colleagues towards oneself. There is no magical vanquishing of a potential enemy here. Rather, one feels better because one's own repressed anxieties and hatreds are interpreted as the jealousy and hatred of rivals. This is a kind of “projection,” which attributes to others unacceptable feelings which are actually one's own. Such defense mechanisms occur in a context in which social aggression is unacceptable, so that the incantations may have actually assisted the patient in sublimating his original feelings of alienation.

Reaction Formation

The defense mechanism known as “reaction formation” (Jacobs 1995, 38; Freud ed. Freud 1991, 533) can be seen in the so-called “baby” incantations in which the baby's crying functions as the “demon” (see Farber 1989). The baby's howling will disturb the gods and must be stilled through the incantation. One utilitarian explanation of the application of these incantations which has been suggested is that they serve as a lullaby (ibid., 152). However, a baby with colic will often not respond to a lullaby, and the explanation fails to account for the hostility expressed in the incantations.

You there, child, human-born, now that you have
come out, now that you have seen the daylight, why
didn't you act this way in your mother's womb?
Instead of treating your father properly, or letting
your mother go out in public, you have upset the
nursemaid, and you have kept the wetnurse awake.
Because of your crying, the household god cannot
sleep, nor does sleep overcome the household goddess
(Gurney 1989, 19; and cf. Farber 1989 line 34f.).

One might assume here that the baby is possessed by a demon which causes it to cry, but since the baby itself is the demon, no exorcism is implied. The question therefore is how magic is supposed to help either the baby or the parents. It is often the case that a parent may feel angry and hostile towards a child, particularly a crying child, and at the same time feel intense guilt and anxiety because of the negative feelings it triggers. In the “baby” incantations, the natural hostility felt by parents towards a crying baby is openly admitted by declaring that the baby is a demon, and the guilt is thereby neutralised. Since the incantation allows the parents to express hostility towards the crying baby, a more physical form of dealing with the problem, such as striking the baby, is thereby possibly avoided. The incantation acts as a “reaction formation,” in which feelings are replaced by their opposites, e.g. sadism is replaced by compassion (Jacobs 1995, 38; Freud ed. Freud 1991, 533). The “baby” incantations counter the suppressed feelings of hostility towards the baby by declaring that the baby’s crying is waking the gods.

Bad Parents

There are other demons, unlike the *ardat lilī*, who are expressly seen as sexless:

They are the Seven, they are the Seven, they are the Seven from the source of the Apsu, they are Seven, adorned ones in Heaven, who grew up in the source of the Apsu, in the cella. Neither male nor female, they are the [wraiths] who flit about, they have [no spouse] and bear no child. They do not know whom to spare or save, nor do they give ear to prayer or supplication (Geller 1985, 42–3 lines 401–9).

Here demons are described as gods gone bad: although they have grown up in heaven, with all the right credentials and advantages, they have turned malevolent. In particular, they lack the usual instincts associated with sex and offspring: they do not know how to love, show pity or act protectively towards children, as humans or gods might do.

Such a description conforms to Freud’s suggestion that God is a parent figure (Jacobs 1995, 61), which in this case can be easily transferred to pagan Mesopotamian gods, with the opposite proposition applying to demons: they are the opposite of one’s parents, they do not care about us, and that makes them all the more frightening. We might be able to detect here the vestiges of repressed feelings against one’s parents, as when the child is scolded or chastised, and then concludes that the parent does not love him. The resultant repressed guilt may be expressed here by transferring these feelings on to a demon, who fulfils this role of the unloving and chastising parent, similar to the angry gods of other incantations. Occasionally the sexual imagery referring to demons is metaphorical, somewhat akin to Freud’s use of symbols and objects referring to sex, as in the following passage:

They are the evil ones who [wander about in the city]. They [slaughter] the cattle in the pen, they [slaughter] the sheep in the sheepfold. They [seize the one lying] in his wife’s room, having taken the child from the nursemaid’s lap. [They murder] the father and son together, and they spear the mother together with her child like fish in the water. They know neither offering [nor] supplication, they were harsh towards the man in the street (Geller 1985, 56–7 lines 620–8).

The sexual imagery is predominant: according to Freud, the *Frauenzimmer* or woman’s room is symbolic for the womb or sex. The slaughter of both cattle and children and the spearing of the mother and child are metaphors for demons invading the womb or perhaps displacing the husband in his own sexual role, with resultant dangers for father, mother and potential offspring. We could analyse this passage as fear of castration, in which the demon takes over the sexual role of the man by invading the woman’s womb with his spear.

Phobias

There are other manifestations of psychological problems which might be cast as demons, and the more extreme cases fall into the category of phobia. The subjects of the earliest incantations are frequently snakes or (less frequently) scorpions. There is scant reference to demons in these incantations, since the snake itself is the object of fear, and the incantations occasionally include a long list of different types of snakes. It seems obvious—even in ancient Mesopotamia—that snakebite could not be cured by incantations, and one must therefore look elsewhere to explain the popularity of these texts. So, it is the fear of the snake itself and the association of the snake with the penis (Freud 1965, 392) that becomes the problem. Mesopotamian incantations likewise refer to the snake “who coils up in the human womb,” corresponding to the “womb-snake.”¹¹ This certainly has the appearance of a phobia. The demons are frequently compared to serpents who crawl under the door of the house, and the many names of snakes in the lexical lists are graphic. The point is that the incantation may be effective, not against snakebite, but against the fear of snakes. The recognition of the phobia and the projection of the phobia by identifying the snake may have been therapeutic because they deal with the patient’s fear itself.

Conclusion

There is no reason to assume that the Mesopotamians had an entirely different psychological make-up from modern Europeans. Fear is commonplace, and fear of the unknown is just as real as the fear of known dangers. In fact, there are often more fears than dangers, so that it is the fear itself which is the problem, not the subject of the fear.

Incantations may have actually been effective, because they tackled that fear. On one level, the patient

believes that the incantation will be effective in removing the demon or preventing his approach, or that it will counter the activities of witches and other evils. On another level, the incantation acts upon the patient's fears and anxieties which he himself cannot recognise or fully describe. Magic serves as a particular form of therapy in Mesopotamia by helping to provide defence mechanisms against various forms of anxiety, depression and neurosis.

There is no magic in magic.

*Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies
University College London*

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Notes

¹According to the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, A/2, 326, the *asakku*-disease was not mentioned in medical texts, and it is assumed to be an illness, known primarily in magic, caused by the *asakku*-demon. Nevertheless, a specific disease may have been intended here: in one legal document a wife suffering from *asakku*-disease allows her husband to take a second wife, so long as she herself continues to receive support (cf. Falkenstein 1956, 8–10).

²Philip Alexander has offered an interesting evaluation of dreams which occur in the Babylonian Talmud, following the usual approach of evaluating dream omens by looking at the ancient records of the dream together with its interpretation (Alexander 1995). For our purposes, however, whether the dream is a good sign or a bad sign is irrelevant. We are primarily interested in ancient dream reports in terms of what they reveal about the unconscious mind and about repression in Freudian terms.

³Freud refers to the "composite figures" in dreams "which are not unlike the composite animals invented by the folk-imagination of the Orient" (Freud ed. Freud 1991, 97). This recalls the many *Mischwesen* of Mesopotamian demonology (cf. Wiggermann 1994, 222–46).

⁴Cf. Bab. Talmud Berakot 56a, which records stories of two rulers, one an unnamed Roman emperor and the second King Shapur of Persia. The Roman emperor asked R. Joshua b. Hananya to forecast what he would see in his dream; in response Joshua described a vivid dream of the emperor being

forced into servile labour for the Persians. In the second story, Shapur made the same request of Samuel, the noted astronomer and medic, who responded that the Romans would capture the emperor and make him grind date stones. In both cases, the rulers thought about the images all day and then dreamt about them at night. This report of the power of suggestion fits the Freudian description of dreams being constructed of thoughts collected in the unconscious mind during the day.

⁵Oppenheim did not understand this group of omens. Since the logogram UM was unclear to him, he translated each of these omens as "if (a man) does UM to ..." The correct reading of UM is actually /dih/, which is used here as a stative of the Akkadian word *tehu*, literally "to approach," but by extension "to make sexual advances towards (someone)," or even to "have sexual relations with (someone)," as the term is used in *Šumma ālu* omens. See Bottéro 1992, 117 note 9.

⁶CT 39 45 28. I am here citing the *Šumma ālu* omens from the cuneiform text since there is not yet any modern text edition of these omens, although they have been discussed by Ann Guinan (Guinan 1990, 9–14). Related to this may be the following example of Freud's pleasure principle: "if a man has intercourse (or talks [Akk. *idbumma*]) with a woman upon the bed, and from over the bed he 'rises' (i.e. has an erection, Akk. *ithima*) and performs his 'manliness' (ejaculates?, Akk. *zikarūtu ipus*), that man will have happiness and joy, and wherever he goes he will achieve his desire" (CT 39 44 18).

⁷One *Šumma ālu* omen mentions having a wet dream: "If a man has sex at night and (Akk. *ithima*) in his dream (var. he ejaculates and [Akk. *iglutma*]) he is smeared with his own semen [Akk. *nīlšu bullul*], he will suffer a loss" (CT 39 44:9; see *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* N 234). The point here is that a man has a wet dream after having had intercourse, which is considered to have ominous implications, but is not suggesting a taboo against masturbation.

⁸Following upon a similar list as above, one text adds:

Whether you are the (ghost) who has no one who sets up the (ritual) sceptre,
Whether you are the (ghost) who has no one to utter his name (at the grave),
Whether you are the (ghost) who has no one to provide a drink offering, or funerary offering,
Whether you are the (ghost) who has no existing resting place ...

⁹One should perhaps bear in mind that the word "knee" in Akkadian is a euphemism for sexual organs (cf. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, B, 255f.).

¹⁰The fact that the Mesopotamians recognised that impotence and performance anxieties were related is obvious from *Šumma ālu* omens referred to above: "If a man always looks at his woman's pudendum [Akk. *ūra* (GA₄. LA) *sinništīšu ittanaplas*], he will have good health, and he will acquire whatever is not his. If a man is facing a woman and he is always looking at his own penis [Akk. *ina šutatišu ušarišu ittanaplas*], no matter what he seeks will not be permanent in his house" (CT 39: 44 19). The astuteness of this observation is impressive. As is so often the case, modern psychology recasts into a technical framework old ideas which are well-represented within folk wisdom.

¹¹The Akkadian translation of this snake is *bašmu* or "dragon," although the Sumerian name *muš-ša-tùr* literally means "womb-snake."

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